Prologue to Warring States

The following was first published in Faction Paradox: Warlords of Utopia (2004) by Lance Parkin...

The air in the Stacks races through the tunnels, pushed by the ghost trains rattling over the dead tracks. Posters for films that never were, and adverts for beauty products that give new meaning to "age-defying", flutter blindly. Occasionally, the icy air slams into abandoned platforms, where insubstantial suicides stand, clothes swirling around them as they stare into the abyss of the permanent way.

Deep in the Stacks, Cousin Octavia welcomes the intermittent blasts of air. She likes it down here, safe not only from surface-level War offensives but also from the tedious internal politicking of the Eleven-Day Empire itself. Down here in the Faction's huge repository of knowledge, beneath a bloodlit London, she could lose herself in research. And if people got lost in the Lobokestvian geography of abandoned underground tunnels whilst looking for her, even better.

Unfortunately, Prester John is good at remembering the way.

'You could visit me in Westminster,' he remarks as he arrives, swirling flyers for The Defective Detective in his wake. Octavia shrugs.

'I've found it,' she tells him.

In the city square the crowd gathered, jostling not only to get a good view, but for their eagerness to be seen by the officials. Four men and a woman knelt, hands tied and heads bowed. A mandarin of the sapphire button stepped forward, peacock silks as stiffly formal as the condemnation he was making.

'- are hereby executed, for the most heinous crime of attempting to disrupt the Most Exalted One's Heavenly Kingdom, for the circulation of pernicious and corrupt ideas promulgated by the heathen foreign devils, for -'

As he continued, guards hacked off the queues of the men, holding the plaited hair high. The woman's hair had already be shorn, and not gently. All five waited silently as the official finished his denouncement.

In the crowd, Liu Hui Ying felt the hand of her father tighten about her upper arm. He was scared, she had realised this morning. Terrified that his laxity, his trade with the foreigners, his schooling of her, would lead to his own beheading. These five had been brought down from the north for this, but Chin Liang-Yu had been a school friend of Liu's. So now her father made her watch her friends kneel in the dirt for their ideas.

Five swords fell, the edges shearing through the second and third vertebrae, through the thick muscles and flimsy vessels of the throat. Chin's head rolled, tainting the dust with

blood, until its force was spent and it came to rest staring upwards at Liu with something like hatred.

Walking back to the dockside factory, where her family's fortune had been made selling antiquities, Liu felt her jaw tingle with the promise of vomiting, her mouth filling again and again with the taste of it. She swallowed it down, urgently wishing she'd managed to close her eyes. Her father's new-found distrust of her education didn't yet outweigh her cheapness as a translator, and there was a new shipment of vases going to Britain. She set to work.

'Please, convey to your father my gratitude for continuing his business with us at this time,' Atkinson said. He took a sip of pai mu tan. Liu's father nodded with satisfaction as she translated.

'We are always honoured by your visits,' he said, then excused himself to supervise packing the crates. Atkinson took another sip of tea. Liu liked these moments, her chance to practise her language without being watched.

'How was the voyage from India?'

'Easy enough. We had an interesting party on board. Your father might want to contact them.'

'Really, how so?'

'It was an archaeological expedition, from Oxford, who hope to find the Great White Pyramid of China. I told them that it was just a myth, but Professor Grieves seems quite sure.'

'What is it this time? The stars aligned to bring down heavenly fire? Prehistoric germ warfare? Godfather Morlock's birthday?' Prester John is sidling through the room, letting his long coat brush against the precarious mounds of research material. Just reminding her that he can bring it all crashing down, make her go back to the fighting. 'Actually, that last one would be of some use. He'd be really pissed off if I threw him a party -'

'The Holy Grail.'

'Again? We've got a storeroom full of the things.'

'The metaphorical Holy Grail: live forever.'

'Given that we've already given history the slip, why would we want that?'

'Think about it. We give history the slip but it always catches up. Always. Remember the Noose?'

Prester John winces. 'Yes, that was embarrassing. So, what's the plan?'

‘I’ll need to mount an expedition into linear time to retrieve it. And I can only trace it to China. During the Boxer Rebellion.’

Prester John nods agreement. The distant rumble of a train swirls Cousin Octavia’s clothes about her, and her shadow dances.

The Night is Long, and Dreams Are Legion

The following story was first published in the Myth Makers anthology series (produced by Canada’s Doctor Who Information Network) in support of Warring States.

George Morrison, late of Peking, stepped out of the chain station and into Guang Xu Bejing. As with all pre-Republic Chinatown Districts, the chains that linked them to the other Districts in the City of the Saved were only permitted to stop outside the city’s towering walls. Morrison limped up the deeply rutted path and waited with peasants and camel-drawn carts to pass through Yungtingmen. A few tourists - two post-humans and a Maori family - waited in a separate line, clutching their red permissions to enter and staring at the white man in the Residents’ queue.

From here it was a decent walk up through the Chinese city, thorugh Qianmen and along the purple-shadowed walls of the Forbidden City to his home. His knee was giving him gyp through, the phantom wound still shooting white twists of pain through the ligaments, and he resolved, as usual, to rest for a while at Wong’s tea house by Qianmen. There was no bullet lodged in his leg, for all his knew thought otherwise, and that too he blamed on Faction Paradox. Her face, the face of their agent in his time, had been hovering there like a pallid moth when he died.

Except, of course, he hadn’t. He had been resurrected in the City of the Saved, the enclave beyond the universe’s end where all human - and post-human - beings were reborn immortal. He walked slowly up the incline, trying to shake free of his pointless anger. He let the familiar warm rising smell of sesame buns and the bitter undertow of opium welcome him after a day arguing in the offices of The Original Times of London.

Every Emperor and Chairman had awoken in ever-lasting Heaven to discover their own Immortal Empire had fallen after them. Each had brought their court with them, although gossip had it that Ch’in was still annoyed about the loss of his terracotta army, and each had set about recreating their world. Some supreme rulers had accepted they were not unique. Puyi, the Last Emperor of the pre-Republics, now worked as a gardener in Kubalai Khan’s great pleasure grounds. Others were intractable. Each had their own Districts with their own capitals: from the Kubalai’s Ta-Tu, to the Great Hall of the People in Mao 1 and the New Imperial in Pearl Empress 8. And each District, each massive sprawling Empire, was in Soho had been to London in the scale of the City hence becoming known collectively as “the Chinatowns”. With death - and war - impossible, the Chinatowns enjoyed a complex and ever-shifting game of political chess.

Morrison, seeking a refuge in his personal hell, had taken up his old job as correspondent for the Times of London and moved to his favourite District to report on the intrigues. The First Republic District had asked him to relocate there, but he had felt vaguely foolish living in a street named after himself. Now he passed through the Qianmen and automatically sat down at his favourite table at Wong's.

'Ah, Doctor Morrison! How are you this day! Son! Bring Doctor Morrison's tea!"

Wong sold teas and tisanes from every District: delicate jasmine blossoms grown on a shoreline; dark bitter leaves from within the Manfold; or one of a hundred thousand teas from within the Chinatowns. Wong had come to recognize Morrison's mood, and offer him tea accordingly. If the leg were bad, it was a customized black smoky blend.

'Doctor Morrison?' an English accented voice asked.

The phantom wound was throbbing, its insistent pain like a second heartbeat, so that he scowled as he looked up. In front of him, looking totally at ease in an Edwardian traveling suit, was a Great Detective. Behind him stood a rather rakish Watson. Morrison cursed: not only was it a Holmes remake, it was an unpopular Roxborough one.

'I'm not a doctor anymore,' Morrison offered. 'If you have come from my wife-'

Morrison had woken on Resrrection Day with a young scar in his thigh and a young woman's face in his mind's eye. He had still smelt incense and gunpowder. Still tasted the horsemeat. Still heard the crack of guns and the screams of the baying Boxer mob as they cut down anyone in their way. Finding himself alone in what appeared to be a London railway terminus hotel had been disconcerting.

It had been nothing to the shock when his wife found him. Everyone came back alone, in an imago created by their own-self image. Many had come back as they had been on their deathbeds, so Morrison, with a clear memory of the Boxer bullet that took his life, was still in his adventuring prime. His wife, a wife he had never even met let alone married, was an old woman. And there were sons he hadn't even conceived of yet, as tall and as old as him. His wife had memories of him dying in an English Edwardian seaside town, not blood-drenched in a makeshift hospital in Peking. If he had died in the Boxer Rebellion, they could never have existed. Yet they did.

They had tried, she from love and he from duty, but he'd said 'Octavia' when he should have said 'Jennie' and they knew she had married a different man. So he had left without a forwarding address.

'I believe,' the Holmes said airily, 'that you engaged us two centuries ago to seek out a woman who was not your wife?'

She'd had sharp bones like a bird and had plunged her hands in blood to perform rituals. Her shadow had danced through the horror and it was her fault that he had been resurrected out of synch. He had never lived to see the Chinese Republic that feted him. Never had his own blood family.

‘It has taken us some time to look through the records,’ the Holmes continued, ‘and the Rump Parliament are notoriously secretive about their agents’ whereabouts but we have checked quite thoroughly. You wanted to find one Cousin Octavia of House Paradox, neé Octavia Sutherland of Edinburgh?’

‘Yes.’ He recalled a drunken visiphone call, back when he had just left Jennie, and a minor monthly debit by the GDA from his credits.

‘She doesn’t exist.’

‘Everyone exists. Even those damn cultists have been immortalized.’

‘Not this one, sir. Normally, they come back, often several times over but she does not exist anywhere in the City.’

Morrison recalled a conversation, late at night when the fires of a burning library illuminating them. Octavia had talked of her desire for immortality, her eyes bright with fervour. And yet here he sat with an ever-lasting emptiness and she was no more than a memory of a wicked smile.